A Freirean Critique of the Competence Model of Teacher Education, focusing on the Standards for Qualified Teacher Status in England.

With appreciative thanks to my colleague Anna Llewellyn, Lecturer in Mathematics in Education at Durham University School of Education, with whom I have enjoyed several stimulating and illuminating conversations around the theme.

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Bring out number, weight and measure in a year of dearth

(William Blake *Proverbs of Hell* 1792).

The standards attempt to objectify "good" teaching, despite the fact that it cannot be objectified.

(Katy Taylor, Durham University PGCE student teacher of English, 2009).

Introduction.

In England and Wales, all Initial Teacher Education (ITE) is underpinned by the official Standards for the recommendation for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), most recently revised and implemented for 2008, henceforth abbreviated simply to the Standards. These Standards form a statutory requirement as the basis for all ITE courses, and student teachers following these courses have to demonstrate that they have 'met' them at an appropriate level; as such, although they may be the occasion of debates about which Standard has been met and when or how, they appear to command a relatively unquestioning acceptance from ITE providers, whether in universities or in schools, and student teachers alike. To some extent, this implicit acceptance may be seen as part of a general acquiescence throughout the domain of education with the various rules and regulations that have formed its legalistic contexts over recent years, with or without any sense of genuine consultation: an acquiescence all too often borne of what could be termed 'initiative fatigue'. However, behind this apparent acquiescence I have been increasingly aware through professional engagement with student teachers, ITE colleagues both at Durham and elsewhere, and mentoring teachers in partnership schools, that the Standards at best represent a severely limited vision of teaching, and at worst actually contradict much of what is, potentially at least, valuable in the experience of teaching and learning. From the starting point of my own work in the field of ITE, as English tutor on the Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) secondary (ie for teaching pupils aged 11-18) course at Durham University, I offer here a radical critique of this Standards-driven ITE paradigm from the perspective of Critical Pedagogy (CP) as developed by Paulo Freire and others, thus providing a theoretical base for further pertinent exploration.

Etymology: the Standards.

The etymology of any word is interesting for those of us fascinated by language, but whether there is any wider contextual significance for the ways in which any particular word is currently used is open to debate. Some would say that previous roots and meanings die as language changes, and thus disappear from current denotation and connotation; alternatively, it is possible to argue that traces of historical development of meaning adhere, often very subtly, to language as used at any given time: including, of course, the present. Oblivious to the conscious intentions of the speaker or the utterance, echoes of the past cohere evocatively around language. To take the word *Standard*, for example, the focus of exploration here, which has been defined thus:

> 'flag or other conspicuous object to serve as a rallying point for a military force," …"stand fast or firm," a compound of words similar to Gothic standan "to stand"and hardus "hard". So called because the flag was fixed to a pole or spear and stuck in the ground to stand upright. … Meaning "unit of measure" is 1327, from Anglo-Fr., where it was used 13c., and is perhaps metaphoric, the royal standard coming to stand for royal authority in matters like setting weights and measures. Hence the meaning "authoritative or recognized exemplar of quality or correctness" (1477). Meaning "rule, principal or means of judgment" is from 1562. That of "definite level of attainment" is attested from 1711…'.
>
> http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=standard (accessed 26/6/08)

Certainly there is food for thought here. The idea of 'standardisation', with its connotations of adjustment to some sort of agreed qualitative level, is predictable enough (and is presumably what the anonymous authors of the QTS Standards intended). Even here, though, there are implications of potentially debilitating conformity and lack of scope for creative flair: the 'standard' model, rather than the

'deluxe' (to revert to now dated car branding terminology). But it is the further etymological connotations that are even more fascinating, and perhaps telling: the militaristic sense of the standard, metonymically suggesting the entire fighting force, focused and heroic (and of course embattled). Thus revealed is a possible mentality behind the Standards: suggestive of robust, self-confident, unquestioning (and by the same token unquestioned) assertiveness, as opposed to any rather more sensitive, affective outlook or pedagogical model. But we need now to turn to the Standards in question here.

ITE and the Standards.

The QTS Standards for Initial Teacher Training themselves (http://www.tda.gov.uk/upload/resources/pdf/p/professional_standards_2008.pdf) comprise 33 separate entities, divided into three sections: Professional Attributes (nine Standards), Professional Knowledge and Understanding, and Professional Skills (each containing twelve Standards). Additionally, it may be readily seen that the length, detail and breadth of each Standard varies considerably, with some comprising several subsections. Interestingly, each section includes the word 'professional'; this in itself is significant and opens up, potentially, a controversial field that has already been critically explored (See, for example, Fish 1995, Gilroy 1998 and Beck 2008). In particular, the nature of what it means to be professional is worthy of attention in this context: does it connote some kind of reflective and active autonomy in working life? Or, as perhaps seems more likely in the context of the Standards and their instructional tone, does it rather imply compliant obedience and accountability to an official version of a broad regulatory framework? The two versions are broadly incompatible, but this has not prevented the blurring of the boundary between them,

not least, perhaps, by those working in the field of ITE. This blurring often takes place around the notion of reflectivity, about which more later: all too frequently, professional reflectivity is encouraged in terms merely of how to implement this or that diktat (or Standard, in the present context), rather than a deeper seated, potentially critical reflection on the entire contextual nature of the diktats. The implications of the simplistic 'obedience' model of professionalism have been spelled out by many, including the American arts educator Elliot Eisner, regretting that

> 'Schools make little place for reflectivity. … Once teachers internalise the routines and learn the content they are to teach [a very limited model of subject knowledge, surely] … their ability to cope is assured and with it the need to grow as teachers diminishes'. (Eisner 1998: 115.)

Or, as Eisner approvingly quotes, from an anonymous source, elsewhere in the same book, 'The denial of complexity is the beginning of tyranny'. (Ibid: 169.) [In fact, the quotation should read 'the essence of tyranny is the denial of complexity'; Jacob Burkhart]. Goudie (1999, in Moore, 2000: 127) takes the argument further:

> Deference to any prescriptive theory is out of pace with time and contexts and suppresses consciousness of the self as a social being; it results in conformity, and disempowers social actors from acting authentically in response to the particular situation. It also turns practice into a technical performance, debilitating the creative imagination as it interacts with external reality'.

By way of further illustration of how the Standards present complex, contested concepts as unproblematic and immutable facts of teaching life, we could look at a word like 'knowledge' and its relationship to the qualifying teacher. Essentially, the teacher is viewed as a holder of knowledge to be imparted, although little is said about the nature of such knowledge, its possibly fluid or contested instability, or what could be done with it pedagogically. Indeed, the teacher is supposed to profess 'secure' subject knowledge and understanding, rather begging the questions of what could be

constituted as ‘insecure’ knowledge and how one would know if one were in the unfortunate position of having it. Questions such as these are not mere quibbles, but arise frequently when judging the quality of observed teaching. As Freire himself points out, ‘Knowing … demands a constant searching. It implies invention and re-invention. It claims from each person a critical reflection on the very act of knowing’. (Freire 2005: 93.) Harrison (1994:7) expressed this complex issue through the apt metaphor of the theatre, asking,

> ‘Could the theatre of education … be trying too hard to ‘deliver the goods’ to its clients, the learners, and leaving no space for them to develop their own vision? Are we providing enough space for learners to bring their own minds and cultures into taking part in learning? Have we lost sight of essential qualities such as play, curiosity and friendship in learning? Whose production *is* it anyway?’

Whose indeed? Although I take it that these questions (including mine) are intended rhetorically, we may hint at a response here: the production of education appears to have lost sight of learners and teachers in its inexhaustible quest for official, governmental accountability. To extend the critical and cultural context a little, the insights of two Romantic poets are illuminating, in the sense that, to answer these questions affirmatively through the act of teaching, is to be able at times to live with a Keatsian ‘negative capability’: ‘that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’. In this broad context teaching is indeed an art, and the implications of the vitally essential attentiveness seem inescapable (unless of course one escapes by hiding behind easily-digested competences or Standards). William Blake’s observation warning against lazy, complacent perception is pertinent here:

‘We are led to believe a lie

When we see not through the eye' (from *Auguries of Innocence*).

Paradoxically, but in a way of course unacknowledged in the Standards with their pronouncements about 'secure' knowledge, genuine understanding recognises and endorses, even celebrates, the fluidity of knowledge in a critical context. Freire again helpfully elaborates: 'Knowledge begins with the awareness of knowing little … Human beings constantly create and re-create their knowledge, in that they are inconclusive, historical beings engaged in a permanent act of discovery'. (Freire 2005: 107.) As Ruddock maintains (1985, in Moore, 2004: 10), it is all too easy to fall prey to what she terms 'a hegemony of habit', whereas 'good teaching is essentially experimental, and habit, if it is permitted to encroach to far on practice, will erode curiosity and prevent the possibility of experiment'.

Transformations and ITE.

There is, then, generally a sense in which the Standards assume a methodical, incremental, predictable, compartmentalised and easily recorded sense of progress towards becoming an effective teacher, especially as they are interpreted in numerous ITE courses in England (some of which insist on discrete pieces of evidence as proof of 'meeting' each individual Standard). However, as many practitioners in the field are aware, the reality can be quite different. I and ITE colleagues from a range of universities have explored this area in research among student teachers of English, leading to the paper *Transformations* (2006), and our findings are pertinent to the present discussion. As we found whilst conducting the 2005-6 research, and at the risk of gross over-simplification of a complex series of issues, it may be helpful to make some attempt to schematise the possible movements in terms of attitudes towards and

experiences of teaching, if only to give a fuller sense of 'reflexivity' in the sense that Moore has explored this term: visualising the development of teaching holistically,

> 'in a much bigger picture: a picture that may be the practitioner's own history, dispositions, prejudices and fears, as well as the wider social, historical and cultural contexts in which schooling itself is situated. In other words, within reflexivity, that which is being evaluated or reflected upon…is not treated as if it were the whole of the picture, but is made sense of by reference to what is happening in the rest of the larger picture'. (Moore 2004: 149.)

Our research (Stevens et al 2008) suggested that student teachers at the start of their courses are likely to mix qualities of trepidation and adventure: the nature of the mix will clearly depend on the personalities and experiences of the people in question, and on other possibly diverse contextual influences. The trepidation is virtually inevitable: starting a new course can be nerve-wracking enough by itself, but is here exacerbated (in most cases) by the prospect of actually teaching, and, perhaps to a lesser extent, by concern over the nature of the subject knowledge required. On the other hand, there is likely to be a vigorous sense of adventure about the possibilities of actually teaching, exemplified by the imaginative resourcefulness so characteristic of student teachers in their early stages. Interestingly, a wide range of early attitudes towards subject knowledge manifested themselves though the research, from self confidence (sometimes verging on the complacent) borne of attaining good first degrees in the appropriate subject, to anxieties often centring on the quality of the first degree, or its lack of 'pure' subject focus, or the sense that most of its content has been forgotten anyway.

Our research suggested that as the PGCE course progresses, various transformations occur, and some of these may seem quite paradoxical. The possible combinations of trepidation and adventure noted above tend to give way to much greater confidence in

terms of the classroom teaching, with more effective class management usually the key here, and it would indeed be strange if this were not the case. The flipside, however, is perhaps less heartening: a certain closing down of that sense of creativity in ideas about what it is possible to teach in favour of acknowledging the constraints of the curriculum directives and classroom management imperatives all teachers have to work within, including, tellingly, the Standards themselves. The research suggested, further, that student teachers frequently undergo similarly paradoxical transformations with regard to their own awareness of subject knowledge; initial self-confidence may dwindle as it is realised that the requirements for teaching their subject are quite different from (and sometimes contradict) the content of traditional degree courses, whilst for those embarrassed at their lack of a straightforward subject degree the opposite transformation may take place as the breadth of subject understanding that is required in the classroom becomes more apparent.

In our analysis of course documentation drawn from the five PGCE courses involved in the research, it became clear that, in an attempt to try to facilitate this sort of transformation, reflectivity was emphasised and encouraged in the context of subject and pedagogical knowledge, understanding and practice. This perception has been further borne out by our work as external examiners on a range of PGCE courses throughout England. However, as the interviews with student teachers showed, the kind of reflection actually undertaken, especially while in schools, is frequently rather narrowly based, focusing on how to improve this or that element of practice or convey some part of subject knowledge more efficiently. Standard Q7(a), in fact, instructs student teachers to 'reflect on and improve their practice…'(TDA 2008), in the context of propelling one's own early personal professional development. However,

this limited, even constraining, discourse is in contrast, as is the entire competences model, with the holistic notion of reflexivity: Moore (2000: 138) again: '…while both the competences and the reflective practitioner discourses may be of use to the teacher, it may be the reflexive discourse that fully 'activates' that usefulness, making it accessible and opening the way to a more critical engagement with the interface between personally-experienced difficulties and systemic failings'.

Freire's Critical Pedagogy.

It is time now to turn to Freire and the developments in Critical Pedagogy (CP) for brighter illumination. Freire's insights into the social, cultural and political dimensions of education have had huge impact on schooling in the developing world, but less so in the West, at least until theorists such as Michael Apple, Henry Giroux and Manuela Guilherme have taken his ideas as the basis of a radical critique of schooling across all cultures, thus developing what is increasingly known as Critical Pedagogy, and an attendant view of literacy, seen as basic to any educational project, termed critical literacy. Already we can see a possible source of difference between the language of the Standards and that of CP: the word 'critical' is singularly absent from the former, except for Standard Q8, where student teachers are required to **'**have a creative and constructively critical approach towards innovation…': not exactly the kind of critical outlook urged by Freire or his followers. Henry Giroux (2001, 2006 and elsewhere), particularly, has been concerned to develop Freire's ideas into a dialectical interplay between what he terms the 'language of critique' with the 'language of possibility', thus espousing a pedagogy at once sharply critical and creatively hopeful: 'The discourse of critique is essential for teachers … But they must also have a language of possibility, one that allows them to think in terms of the

"not yet," to speak the unrepresentable, and to imagine future social relations outside the existing configuration of power'. (Giroux 2006: 7.) This is hardly the stuff of official government documents, let alone a set of prescriptive (some would say, by implication, proscriptive too) statements defining what the official view of a satisfactory teacher looks like.

It is, however, precisely this combination of critique with possibility that is important: either one without the other could be seen as severely deficient (wholly negative, or purely idealistic) and neither, predictably enough, is adequately represented in the Standards. The critical teacher's, or teacher educator's, role is to balance these elements, managing the necessary dialectical tension between them. Seeing the word and the world (Freire's telling fusion: the world as it is perceived providing context for the language of its participants, and vice-versa) as new, open to critical insight *and* a sense of wonder, to critical distance *and* informed engagement, is absolutely fundamental here, and is at the heart of what is recommended by exponents of CP. The implication is that knowledge and understanding are there to be unlearned and relearned as well as learned. This does not refer simply to curricular knowledge, but to the very stuff of the relationship between those engaged in teaching and learning. As so often, there is a kernel of good teaching praxis in this, for the success of any classroom depends ultimately on its culture: specifically the tension between modes of social behaviour accrued through experience and brought to the classroom, and those negotiated, formed and learned as a direct result of being there. Effective teaching manages this tension, in both enabling and directing senses of good management, with varying degrees of theoretical self-consciousness.

This is where a distinctly subversive dimension enters, and is, even more predictably, avoided by the strictures of the Standards. The kind of educational experience implied here is manifestly about power, about who has it, and what is done with it to whom, whether in macrocosmic or microcosmic context. Whereas for traditional schooling, the kind embedded in the language and message of the Standards, notions of power are rarely brought to the fore, and any inadvertent teaching about or through power structures does nothing to question their nature except perhaps in very generalised terms, for the critical teacher the nature of these structures is central, manifest, and necessarily subversive. The form of the subversion may be in the culture of the classroom itself, manifesting itself in the open, debated acknowledgement of inter-subjectivities, social relations, and a questioning approach to the role of the followed curriculum, as well as in the content of that curriculum, as taught. As Guilherne elaborates,

> 'Critical Pedagogy (CP) … intervenes with ways of knowing and ways of living thus being a cultural enterprise as well as an educational one. CP deals with the relationship between the self, the others and the world and by leading the pupils to critically examine these relationships it makes them believe that they can make a difference and, in so doing, the pedagogical and the cultural become political too'. (2002: 21.)

Freire himself starts from the perspective of problematisation in teaching and learning, as opposed to simply gaining competence confidently, if superficially. As he elucidates, there is certainly no one single path to be taken towards effective teaching: each pedagogical situation requires problematising in order to demonstrate precisely this:

> 'In the process of problematisation, a step made by a Subject [ie teacher or student, or of course student-teacher] to penetrate the problem-situation continually opens up new roads for other Subjects to comprehend the object being analyzed. Educators who are problematised by engaging in this kind of action 're-

> enter into' the object of the problem through the 'entering into' of the educatees. This is why educators continue to learn. The humbler they are in this process the more they will learn'. (Freire 2005: 135.)

As such, problematisation is the Freirean basis of understanding and critical empowerment for both teachers and learners, the very antithesis of the competence-based model, and he quotes Erich Fromm to underline the point:

> '[Mankind] conforms to anonymous authorities and adopts a self which is not his. The more he does this, the more powerless he feels, the more he is forced to conform. In spite of a veneer of optimism and initiative, modern man is overcome by a profound feeling of powerlessness…'. (In Freire 2005: 6.)

This perception is powerfully apposite to the nature of the Standards, offering as they do a sometimes beguiling 'veneer of optimism and initiative' whilst masking the critical complexity, at once liberating and problematic, inherent in the processes of teaching and learning. Once again, Freire is clear in his appraisal of what teaching can achieve in this context, and his critique applies with similar vaidity to any learning, whether it be young pupils in a classroom or older student teachers grappling with imposed standards and competences:

> 'The role of the educator is not to "fill" the educated with "knowledge", technical or otherwise. It is rather to attempt to move towards a new way of thinking in both educator and educatee, through the dialogical relationship between both. The flow is in both directions'. (Freire 2005: 112.)

Tentative conclusions.

The poet W B Yeats observed, in a remarkably similar context, 'education should be not filling a bucket but lighting a fire'. But the Standards seem to profess a bucket-filling view of teaching and learning, ultimately: essentially espousing a 'transmission' pedagogical model served by teachers ready, willing and able to meet a series of

clearly defined (by others of course) competences (the term, interestingly, used instead of 'standards' in previous manifestations of such lists). Yet, for many commentators, placed within and outside the CP stable, such a model of teaching and learning is simplistic and inadequate. The philosopher of education David Carr, for instance, suggests

> '…it may indeed be objected that professional competence models of teacher education and training appear to involve reduction of pedagogical expertise to mastery of information (empirical theories and official guidelines) and skills (of communication, organisation and management) of a kind that falls short of authentic intellectual and/or critical engagement with the complex principles of professional practice'. (2003: 53.)

In a sense, the competence model of teacher education (or training, as implied by such documents as the Standards) is the equivalent for beginning teachers of the transmission model of leaning (filling the bucket, essentially) they are in practice often encouraged to adopt for their classes. However, as Ivor Goodson (2005: 31) points out, '…if the intention of teaching is to involve *all* pupils in learning then transmission, with its dependence on the viability of pre-planned educational incidents and outcomes, is particularly ill suited'. There is an interesting (and all too often debilitating) parallel between transmission models of teaching and learning in the classroom and competence-led practices in teacher education / training: the one reflects the other in a closed system of mirrors, and neither can be allowed to reflect the broader social, cultural or pedagogical context. Nevertheless the outside world does intrude (the Standards themselves are a pertinent example of this) in terms of judgemental surveillance; failure to 'meet' the Standards means failure to attain 'Qualified Teacher Status'; 'meeting' of the Standards, however, says little about the real quality of teaching and learning practised, and is at best only useful in that it may (apparently) be measured.

I am acutely aware that the context of ITE in England is constraining, and in many ways militates against the kind of reflexive practice that I am commending here: the competence model, embedded in the QTS Standards, is tightly and bureaucratically policed, and of the thirty-six weeks of the PGCE course, two-thirds are spent in schools where, in effect, the curriculum is 'delivered' and the Standards met (or not, as the case may be). Nevertheless, I do perceive some grounds for optimism. Empirical research carried out with a colleague from a neighbouring university PGCE course (Stevens and Lowing, 2008) on the nature and effect of university tutors' observations of student teachers' lessons indicated that these observational visits, coupled with the impact of the university-based part of the course more generally, occasioned and promoted a reflexive turn. In particular, our research indicated that student teachers themselves tended to welcome the problematisation of learning situations (along the lines Freire suggested, as alluded to above), and the attendant senses of professional autonomy and practical flexibility in determining the direction of their practice. In effect, as Lowing and I maintained, this kind of perception enabled student teachers to participate actively in a professional 'community of practice' (Edwards, Gilroy and Hartley 2002: 110), the pre-requisite of genuine reflexivity. Such participation, although it may be alien to the spirit of competency models of teacher education, is not actually precluded by them: it is, in fact, quite possible to be a reflexive practitioner *and* to meet the Standards. The university's role in ITE is fundamental here, as both the *Transformations* and the *Observations* research projects suggested, a view endorsed by Burns (2006: 255):

> 'Expressing doubts or even asking probing questions will never be easy in the school context. This is…fundamentally because the overwhelming priority in school is to decide how to act… Without the

> university's distinctive contribution any commitment to critical scrutiny would remain weak and access to research-based findings extremely limited'.

Which brings us neatly back to the opening quotation from William Blake: it would indeed be an epoch of dearth if we as teacher educators relied on number, weight or measure as presented in the Standards. Fortunately, as I have tried to suggest here, there is an alternative vision of teaching available that combines the language of critique and the language of possibility to go well beyond the limitations of the competency model.

David Stevens. Durham University School of Education. September 2009.

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